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Africa Spectrum

Liu, Philip H. P. (2018),
Finding the Baoding Villages: Reviewing Chinese Conceptualisation of Sino–African Agricultural Cooperation, in: *Africa Spectrum*, 53, 2, 91–118.

URN: http://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-11354

ISSN: 1868-6869 (online), ISSN: 0002-0397 (print)

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<www.africa-spectrum.org>

Published by
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of African Affairs,
in co-operation with the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute, Freiburg, and Hamburg University Press.

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Finding the Baoding Villages: Reviewing Chinese Conceptualisation of Sino–African Agricultural Cooperation

Philip H. P. Liu

Abstract: Scholars usually examine African images of the Chinese to understand African responses to Chinese economic expansion, yet they rarely observe that a constructed image of Africa has been built up in China. That image is intrinsically racist and promotes the idea that Chinese investment can somehow "rescue" Africans from their "laziness." This paper analyses the enduring legend of the Baoding villages, constructed to persuade the Chinese public that Chinese farmers could easily make their fortunes and win respect in Africa. A review of the history of Sino–African agricultural cooperation reveals that this fabricated narrative was convincing because it reinforced Chinese perceptions of African inferiority and reproduced existing ideologies of foreign aid and propaganda concerning policy effectiveness.

■ Manuscript received 15 February 2018; accepted 4 June 2018

Keywords: Africa, China, Baoding villages, Chinese investment in Africa, foreign aid, Liu Jianjun, Sino–African agricultural cooperation, racism

Philip H. P. Liu is an associate professor at and chair of the Graduate Institute of Development Studies, National Chengchi University, Taipei, ROC. His research interests include Sino–African relations, Chinese diplomatic history, and ethnicities.
E-mail: <hpliu@nccu.edu.tw>

Introduction

Racism has long underpinned the provision of foreign aid. William Easterly argued that the West exchanged its old racist language for a new rhetoric of foreign aid: "uncivilised" became "underdeveloped," and "savage people" became "the Third World" (2007: 24). According to Andy Baker (2015), white Americans see black foreigners as lacking in human agency, and thus in need of foreign aid. Paulette Goudge contended that helping the Third World poor is actually "exacerbating the situation by replicating white-on-black power relations" (Goudge 2003: 23). Perceptions of aid recipients can be manipulated by the power relations of aid providers; for example, Jeffrey Sachs (2006: 207) showed that many people have used racist stereotypes of Africans to explain the failure of aid programmes.

Depictions of the uneven power relations between blacks and whites may also promote aid provision. For example, images of misery in which Africans are portrayed as nameless, passive victims usually elicit compassion from Westerners (Bleiker and Kay 2007). Reinforcing the stereotype of African backwardness may assist fundraising, but it has been criticised as an extension of colonialism (Manzo 2006). Postcolonialists emphasise the colonial distinction drawn between "us" and "the other," which leads to the psychological construct of "the giver as superior and the receiver as inferior" (Goldfinger 2006).

Historically, the Han people adopted an attitude of discrimination towards "barbarian" groups that had not accepted Chinese culture (Ma 2014: 8), in which white-skinned barbarians were considered slightly superior to their dark-skinned counterparts because the latter were believed to eat raw food. In the seventeenth century, mainly through Macau, China became more familiar with the slavery system and African slaves sometimes fled to China. This knowledge of the slave trade confirmed the low status of Africans in the Chinese world view, with black Africans becoming more engrained as a symbolic expression of slavery. Therefore, in addition to "black barbarians" (*heiyi*), Chinese (mostly Cantonese) also called Africans "black slaves" (*heinu*), "devil slaves" (*guinu*), and "barbarian devils" (*fangui*) (Liu 2013: 132–134).

In the nineteenth century, conflicts between China and Europe made China abandon its initial impression of Europeans as barbaric. While China began to learn from European culture, there was no socioeconomic force to improve the Chinese perspective of Africans. Even worse, Chinese scholars were influenced by Social Darwinism and reinforced racist portrayals of Africans as inferior (Dikotter 1992).

In the mid-twentieth century, racial equality and anti-colonialism emerged as founding principles of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and Beijing tried to realise these principles by providing aid to Africa. However, racial conflict occurred on university campuses in China during the 1960s and 1980s on the grounds that Africans were thought to be wasting Chinese aid (Sautman 1994; Liu 2013). Therefore, the Sino–African relationship, like Western–African relations, may have been publicly perceived as consisting of a giver and a receiver.

China's support for Africa today is a complex mix of aid and investment; the bilateral relationship is no longer that of giver and receiver. However, Cheng Yinghong argued that the word "Africa" is inseparable from "aid" for ordinary Chinese, who still understand China's provision of aid as gift-giving rather than a complex investment strategy. Therefore, racial prejudice against Africans persists. Noting that the Chinese are sensitive to Western racist attitudes but blind to their own racism, Cheng called such racial ignorance "racism with Chinese characteristics." He further argued that Chinese perceptions of black Africans have been racialised to perpetuate the negative image of Africans as "the primitive and inferior other" (Cheng 2011).

Cheng's claims have been supported by recent field research. Tang Xiaoyang of Tsinghua University confirmed empirically that most Chinese entrepreneurs in Africa believe that Africans are very lazy (Tang 2014: 266). Howard French conducted first-hand interviews with Chinese in Africa, and found that many Chinese hold racist views of Africans but still hope to make a profit from and migrate to Africa (French 2015). Contrary to our general understanding, although Africa is attracting Chinese investment, Chinese investors do not seem to perceive Africans positively.

Many researchers have used African images of Chinese to investigate the influence of Chinese economic expansion, with diverse results (Sautman and Yan 2009; Fijalkowski 2013; Hess and Aidoo 2015). However, research on Chinese images of Africans has been limited. As do many in the West, many Chinese racially stereotype Africans. If the West has used discourses of an "inferior other" to establish a powerful "us" that justifies their provision of aid to Africa, has China similarly represented Africans as primitive and inferior to support its current foreign policy, which combines aid with investment? How have negative images of Africans been manipulated to vindicate Chinese economic expansion? A case study is used to answer these questions.

The Baoding Villages

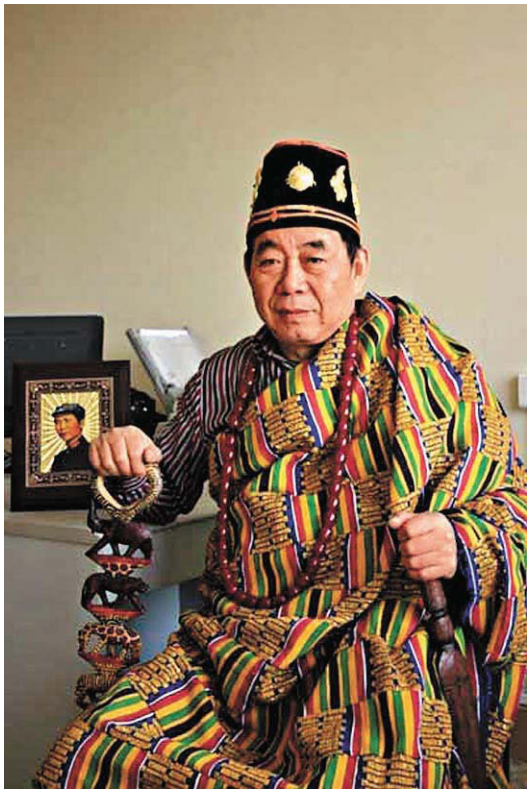
Liu Jianjun's Undying Legend

The term "Baoding villages" became famous several years ago, when Liu Jianjun, formerly a local government official in the city of Baoding, reported that he had been helping farmers migrate to Africa since 2005, and had established settlements for Chinese farmers known as Baoding villages. After a 30-minute talk broadcasted on China Central Television (CCTV) in January 2007, during which he explained how easily these farmers had made their fortunes in Africa, Liu was interviewed by numerous Chinese and Western media outlets. He claimed that in 1996, some Chinese from Baoding had accidentally discovered the fertility of Zambia's land and quickly made their fortunes by growing food in Zambia. Within a short time, Liu explained, these Chinese farmers had extended their agribusiness activities to 28 African countries. They formed settlements called Baoding villages, each with 400 to 2,000 residents, on more than 1,000 square kilometres of leased land.

Liu claimed that although Africa's land is fertile, the African people are "a little bit lazy, happier to pick fruit from trees than to grow it themselves" (Coonan 2008). On the grounds that Africans' farming skills have been atrophied by laziness, he argued that exporting Chinese farmers to Africa would both solve the continent's food problems and enable Chinese farmers to make their fortunes. He said that with the extension of the Baoding villages, farmers of Côte d'Ivoire were so grateful that they awarded Liu the honorific title of "Chief" (*qiuzhang* in Chinese, referring to the head of a primitive tribe). He then used Côte d'Ivoire to represent the whole of Africa, called himself "African Great Chief" (*Feizhou da qiuzhang*), and his kente-cloth cloak was the proof. A photograph of Liu dressed as an "African chief" was widely circulated in the Western media (see Figure 1).

Liu's story is regarded as true by most journalists and some scholars (Brunn 2011: 1258; Nyíri 2010: 108). However, from 2007 to 2009, Chinese netizens mounted an investigative campaign called "Baoding villages: Where are you?" in 15 African countries alleged to host the villages, and failed to find them. At approximately the same time, several Sino–African specialists interviewed Liu Jianjun on the matter and even searched physically for Baoding villages in Zambia. They concluded that the number of Chinese farmers in Africa had been greatly exaggerated (Yan and Sautman 2010: 328; Bräutigam 2009: 266–269).

Figure 1. Liu Jianjun Dressed as an "African Chief"



Source: Coonan 2008.

However, Chinese media outlets continued to interview Liu Jianjun and broadcast his stories of Chinese success in Africa. For example, two articles on Liu's experiences appeared in 2012 in the PRC Ministry of Culture's monthly publication. The abovementioned photograph of Liu dressed as an African chief was used on the cover, and the articles confirmed that Liu had drawn domestic and international attention by "helping tens of thousands of Chinese farmers, entrepreneurs and businesses to settle down in Africa" (Wen and Li 2012). In 2013 in another magazine, published by Jiansu Province's Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, the Baoding villages were reported to have made so much money for Chinese in Africa that the settlements had become "villages of Chinese bosses" (Bi 2013). Due to the ongoing fascination with Liu's story, Deb-

orah Bräutigam called the Baoding villages a legend that, "like a zombie, […] refused to lie down and die" (Bräutigam 2015: 73–74).

Chinese God of Agriculture

In general, Chinese perceptions of African villages are very negative: many high-ranking Chinese officials, even President Xi Jinping, have repeatedly cited African villages as an undesirable model of Chinese development (Luo et al. 2016). It can thus be inferred that the persistent legend of prosperous Chinese villages in Africa not only serves the government's ideological agenda but explains China's agricultural cooperation with Africa. The aim of this paper is not to determine whether the story of the Baoding villages is true or false, but to ask why this story has survived for so long in China.

In addition to the photograph of himself dressed as an African chief, well known in the West, Liu disseminated a picture via Chinese media to encourage the Chinese to invest in Africa. The latter photograph shows an African peasant surrounded by other locals, and one of them seemed to be kowtowing to Liu (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Liu Jianjun's "Proof" of African Begging for Agricultural Assistance

Source: Tang 2013.

> [The photograph shows] a friendly African brother wearing ceremonial dress: his red garment represents the sun, his black pants represent his race and his yellow boots represent the earth. He knelt and gave his land title to the Chinese. Under the supervision of Côte d'Ivoire's defence minister Kedakuaxi, he solemnly proclaimed, "My ancestors, please forgive me. I did not manage your land well. Now I ask the Chinese to cultivate the land. Please bless them." (Jing 2008; Tang 2013)[1]

This account would make it seem as if Liu made reference to a ritual of reverence to divine figures, which was just mentioned as "kowtowing." Liu Jianjun reported raising his left hand and replying in the man's own language, which he derogatorily referred to as the "local tribe speak" (*dangdi tuyu*), as follows: "You are all my children. I will help your land to grow bananas, other types of food, and gold" (Jing 2008; Tang 2013).[2]

In short, the photograph shows Africans begging the Chinese to provide agricultural aid. Kowtowing while wearing ceremonial dress is usually part of a religious ritual. Noting that the colours of the chief's clothes represented the sun, the land, and the "African race," Liu explained that black Africans have such admiration for Chinese farming skills that the Chinese are regarded as equivalent to gods of agriculture. The Chinese god of agriculture (Shennong or the Yan Emperor) is so important to Chinese culture that the Han people usually regard themselves as descendants of Shennong (*yanhuan zisun*). Shennong is believed to have invented cultivation 5,000 years ago, enabling the Chinese – formerly cultureless barbarians – to adopt sedentary farming and gradually develop the Chinese civilisation.

This God–human relationship must have been so convincing that many Chinese media outlets were interested in Liu's agricultural success. Thus, the legend of the Baoding villages could be based on blatant racism that drew on existing Chinese perceptions of African cultural infer-

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1 Translated by the author. The original Chinese reads, "*Shanliang de Feizhou xiongdi chuan zhe zhuanyong de yifu—shangyi hongse daibiao yangguang , yao xia heise daibiao zhongzu, xi xia tu huangse daibiao tudi—guixia lai ba tudi zhengjiao gei Zhongguoren. Zai Ketediwaguo fangbu zhang Kedakuaxi de zhuchi xia, zhuangyan dihan: 'zu xian, qing ni yuanliang wo, ni liu gei women de tudi, women meiyou guan hao, xianzai qing Zhongguoren lai bangzhu gengzuo, qing nin baoyou tamen.*'" See Liu Jianjun's website: <http://fzliujianjun.blog.163.com/album/#m=2&aid=218470159&pid=6749484298> (12 July 2017). "Côte d'Ivoire's defence minister Kedakuaxi" may refer to Moise Lida Kouassi, the minister of state for defence and civil protection.

2 Translated by the author. "Growing gold" refers to getting rich from the agricultural products. The original Chinese reads, "*Nimen dou shi wo de haizi, wo yao rang nimen de tudi zhangchu liangshi, zhangchu xiangjiao, zhangchu jinzi.*"

iority. As Liu Jianjun, born in 1945, was a local government official for many years, his understanding of African agriculture was probably based on official propaganda and civilian impressions of Sino–African agricultural cooperation since the establishment of the PRC. He disseminated his experiences in Africa in the form of photographs and anecdotes and received a very positive response from the public. Determining how Liu constructed the Baoding villages legend, and how the public accepted it, requires attention to materials on Sino–African agricultural aid and investment distributed to the public since the 1960s.

Early Chinese Agricultural Aid

Mao Era

During the Mao era, due to strong anti-colonialism, black skin signified revolution and progressiveness rather than inferiority. Numerous items of propaganda such as photographs and paintings were disseminated to convey Africans' strength, bravery, and friendship with the Chinese. The term "African/black brothers" was widely used in the Chinese media, and Mao personally praised "African black brothers" for helping China to rejoin the United Nations (Deng 2008: 232). These historical representations of Sino–African brotherhood were the origin of Liu Jianjun's reference to "a friendly African brother."

The strength of commitment to the Sino–African brotherhood was evidenced by eight key principles of foreign aid announced by Premier Zhou Enlai in 1964. These principles emphasised "mutual benefit" and the obligation to help recipients of aid to "increase their income and accumulate capital" (Larkin 1973: 105).[3] The term "mutual benefit" indicated that China would be content with enhancing its political reputation while Africa unilaterally enjoyed economic benefits. Anti-colonialist and related concerns about African economic development were so strong that most Chinese diplomats criticised the West for taking away Africa's agricultural raw materials (Guo 2006: 73).

In line with these fervent expressions of altruism, the main objective of China's provision of agricultural aid was to increase grain production in Africa, removing the need for Africans to sell raw materials overseas in exchange for food. In most cases, the introduction of Chinese

3 The original English can be seen on the PRC Foreign Ministry's website: <www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/t18001.shtml> (15 July 2017).

intensive farming methods to Africa rapidly increased food supply, and African politicians praised the agricultural changes brought about by Chinese technicians. Proverbs such as "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime" were frequently used to describe the Chinese contribution to African agriculture.

Compared with the sedate approval of politicians, African farmers reacted more dynamically to China's involvement in Africa. Singing and dancing to express happiness was common. Records also show that the Chinese contribution was so widely recognised that during war, technicians who did not speak the local language had only to say "Kibimba," the name of a Chinese rice scheme in Uganda, to be allowed to pass by the militia. In some cases, Africans so highly esteemed Chinese techniques that they "gave the honorific title 'Chief' to Chinese technicians" (Waijiaobu dangdai Zhongguo shijie waijiao shenya bianji weiyuanhui 1995a: 109). Even more strikingly, some farmers expressed appreciation by "kneeling on the ground for a long time […] with tears in their eyes […] calling the Chinese technicians 'saviours'" (Wang 1999: 200; Waijiaobu dangdai Zhongguo shijie waijiao shenya bianji weiyuanhui 1995b: 46, 1995c: 394).

These powerful scenes of African appreciation indicated the success of China's agricultural aid and revolutionary enthusiasm. However, agricultural development usually declined soon after the Chinese technicians left, for which an explanation was needed. Although the aid records provide no examples of harsh complaints, Chinese technicians generally believed that the agricultural opportunities created by the fertility of African land were wasted by lazy Africans. However, they were aware that criticising African laziness might incur punishment, as it violated ideological principles and orders from the top. Hua Guofeng warned Chinese technicians that they "should not complain about African laziness and filthiness, but regard Africans progressively" (Jiang 2013: 46).

Hua Guofeng proved that many Chinese, even during the revolutionary era, still held negative opinions of black Africans, but were not allowed to express these opinions for ideological reasons. Criticism of black African laziness was thus expressed carefully, in statements such as "Africans admire Chinese diligence" or "the Chinese have helped Africans to understand their land's fertility and productivity" (Waijiaobu dangdai Zhongguo shijie waijiao shenya bianji weiyuanhui 1995c: 96, 218). African land was described as so fertile that even a walking stick could rapidly take root, enabling Africans simply to pick up food from the ground; this was used to explain the difficulty experienced by the

Chinese in teaching Africans to grow rice (Waijiaobu dangdai Zhongguo shijie waijiao shenya bianji weiyuanhui 1995b: 205, 147–148).

In this era, perceptions of black African backwardness were understood to result from colonialism; therefore, black Africans were positioned as China's revolutionary comrades in need of aid. To prove the effectiveness of China's aid provision, African demonstrations of appreciation, both official and civilian, were publicised. However, the sheer extent of African gratitude for Chinese agricultural aid, conveyed by kneeling on the ground and conferring the honorific title of "Chief," for example, reinforced Chinese perceptions of black African incompetence. Africa's naturally fertile land and easy access to food were used to explain this incompetence. Some of these records may have inspired Liu Jianjun to fabricate the legend of the Baoding villages.

Post-Mao Era

After the Chinese government launched economic reforms in the early 1980s, capitalism and the West were no longer treated as hostile, and China was no longer revolutionary. Ideological change reduced politicians' eagerness to promote foreign aid. For example, Deng Xiaoping complained that so much aid had been provided for China's allies that many recipients had become excessively dependent on China. This explains the decrease in the proportion of the national budget allocated to foreign aid between 1973 (7.2 per cent) and 1981 (0.6 per cent) (Yang and Chen 2010: 49–51). Once regarded as China's revolutionary brothers, the recipients of aid had become a financial burden.

As the pursuit of market-oriented self-development became an increasing priority in China, the government had to develop a new foreign-aid strategy. In 1983 Premier Zhao Ziyang announced new principles of "economic and technical cooperation" with Africa, again referring to "mutual benefit." However, as these were no longer foreign-aid principles, the terms "cooperation" and "mutual benefit" implied that China would only help African countries to "increase their income and accumulate capital" in return for economic benefits.

Existing aid units were transformed into benefits-seeking units. For example, for ideological reasons, the Chinese government had previously criticised the exportation of African agricultural raw materials to the West; however, such exportation was an integral part of the post-Reform mutual-benefit policy. A former Chinese ambassador to Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) proudly recalled converting construction units used in former aid projects as part of the new policy. The Chinese government actively invested in a factory left by Westerners to

enable China to profit from exploiting forestland and exporting wood from Zaire (Waijiaobu dangdai Zhongguo shijie waijiao shenya bianji weiyuanhui 1995b: 205, 189–193).

China was no longer willing to provide aid without a profit. Much of its "cooperation" with African countries in the 1980s was based on existing projects. Bräutigam cited many cases in which Africans were portrayed as incapable of managing Chinese projects, and explained that the Chinese government thus began to offer technical support for completed projects in the early 1980s, to help African countries "build self-reliance." During this cooperation, China explored "the links between aid and investment" to enable new Chinese corporations to obtain "experiences and maybe profits." Privatisation was also implemented to "resuscitate failed projects, restoring them to life and health" (Bräutigam 2009: 56–62).

To present the previous altruistic strategy as ineffective and the new strategy – privatisation and the involvement of profit-oriented Chinese corporations – as the best means of helping Africa, the African inability to manage Chinese projects had to be emphasised. In the 1980s, examples of failing aid projects rejuvenated by the Chinese were circulated widely among the Chinese public. For example, in 1988, praising the effectiveness of Zhao Ziyang's principles of foreign aid, a journalist writing for the *People's Daily* reported that after the Chinese handed over a tannery project to Mali, the factory soon became "hopeless" (*buke jiuyao*). When Chinese technicians returned to the factory, it rapidly experienced huge growth. Similarly, the TAZARA Railway was reported to have suffered a financial loss as soon as it was transferred from Chinese to African management in 1976. However, after Chinese technicians joined the management team in 1983, the railway's prospects improved; by 1987, China had received a net profit of USD 27 million from the railway (Ming 1988).

All of these Chinese success stories conveyed the clear message that black Africans' management skills were weak and even "hopeless." In the era of economic reform, when China's government began to learn from the West, black skin lost its resonance as a revolutionary symbol. As a result, reports of Chinese success reinforced existing perceptions in China of black African inferiority. Public information on black Africans' poor management of Chinese projects possibly encouraged racial riots against African students that occurred on university campuses during the 1980s. In addition to accusing Africans of backwardness and laziness, Chinese students complained that Africa was wasting Chinese aid (Johnson 2007: 44–50; Sautman 1994; Sullivan 1994).

Before the 1980s, due to ideological concerns and an emphasis on Sino–African comradeship, Chinese technicians were not allowed to criticise black Africans for their agricultural failings. However, in the post-Reform era, when capitalist methods of helping Africa were being explored, depictions of African weakness were increasingly used to demonstrate the strength of the new foreign-aid policy. The Chinese were now freer to express their views on black African inferiority to prove the superiority of Chinese management. Technicians involved in the above-mentioned Kibimba Rice Scheme offered reports similar to stories of Chinese success during the 1980s.

The Kibimba Rice Scheme, established during the 1970s, was designed to be a turn-key aid project. It was handed over to Uganda in 1982, but in the meantime the goal of Chinese aid policy had changed to one of seeking profit. The Chinese government assumed, albeit without clear proof of Ugandan incapability, that the country lacked effective managers, and in 1983 took over the management of the scheme once again. In a paper published in 1986 in the academic journal of the Ministry of Commerce of the PRC, a technician involved in the rice scheme praised Chinese achievement, reporting that the rice farms had collectively become a profit-making corporation because their management was predominantly Chinese. The technician concluded that Chinese management was the best way to "revitalise old Chinese aid projects" (Gui 1986). The Chinese technicians working on the scheme went home in 1989. In 1991, however, several technicians were sent back to help the Ugandan managers, as the farm was in decline. One of these technicians reported that the Kibimba Rice Scheme had suffered serious losses before the Chinese technicians left in 1989 (Ma 1992).

The rice scheme was not really "old" when its management was transferred from Uganda to China. It was not "revitalised" in the 1980s, and the Chinese managers were not better than their Ugandan counterparts. However, Chinese foreign aid was being remodelled as a new form of cooperation, and African incompetence had to be emphasised to support the new policy.

As illustrated by the Kibimba Rice Scheme, the image of "poor management" in Africa has repeatedly been fabricated or exaggerated to meet Chinese needs. As the Chinese government wanted to bring the rice project under Chinese management, perceptions of African inferiority were revived and Ugandans were again presented as incapable. The same narrative can be extended to Sino–African economic cooperation overall in the post-Mao era. The image of Africa was restructured to

present Africans as inferior rather than revolutionary, demonstrating the effectiveness of China's new mutual-benefit policy.

Appearance of Agricultural Gods

Gods in the Sino–Zambia Friendship Farm

According to Liu Jianjun, the Baoding villages were constructed in Zambia in 1996. Therefore, it is vital to trace Chinese agricultural cooperation with Zambia since 1996 to understand the development of the Baoding legend. It should be mentioned in advance that since 1995 Beijing has officially encouraged its agencies and commercial entities to closely combine foreign aid with investment and other profit-oriented activities (Sun 2014).

In the early 1990s, to help Zambia "increase its food supply and job opportunities" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC 2014), Beijing decided to provide not only aid but private investment, enabling the Chinese to enjoy full management of an agricultural project for the first time. Using low-interest loans, the Chinese government invested USD 300,000 in a state enterprise to build a "Sino–Zambia Friendship Farm" (Yun 2000: 309).

The concept of Chinese gods of agriculture in Africa emerged with the construction of the Sino–Zambia Friendship Farm, the first Beijing-sponsored and Chinese-owned agricultural project in Africa. In 1997 a paper entitled "Chinese Gods of Agriculture" (*Zhongguo shennong*) was published in the journal of the PRC's Ministry of Agriculture (Hu 1997). It stated that this farm, though medium-sized, was the most efficient among 2,000 foreign-invested farms and performed better than many of those run by white men. The Chinese had ensured good harvests and made a profit of USD 1 million in the previous six years, and were thus honoured as agricultural gods by the locals.[4]

In its role as an agent of God's mercy, the Chinese government recognised that in addition to making money and surpassing Western projects in Africa, China must be presented as helping Africa. Accordingly, in 2001, a paper also entitled "Chinese Gods of Agriculture" was published in the Ministry of Agriculture's journal (Li and Wang 2001). Al-

4 This paper did not define Chinese efficiency, but Deborah Bräutigam conducted field research in Zambia and Beijing and concluded that the Sino-Zambia Friendship Farm struggled to be profitable. She also pointed out that the Chinese press tended to exaggerate the performance of Chinese farms (Bräutigam 2015: 109–110).

though the focus of this paper was the Sino–Zambia Friendship Farm, the successes of this Chinese-owned farm were implicitly extended to China's overall engagement with Africa. In addition to praising Chinese management skills and profit-making, the author argued that China's agricultural gods had been able to achieve so much due to Africa's lack of development and its ongoing food shortage.

As the performance of this pilot project satisfied Beijing, helping Africa by selling food to Africans gradually became the core incentive of Sino–African agricultural cooperation. In 2002 China's then deputy minister of foreign trade and economic cooperation, who was in charge of foreign aid, said, "Sino-African agricultural cooperation in the new century must be conducted by enterprises and should be market-oriented" (Ju 2002). The deputy agricultural minister, Han Changfu, also described the investment of Chinese agribusinesses in Africa as a "win-win" form of cooperation, because China's agricultural successes helped to solve Africa's food problems (Ju 2002).

The Chinese model of win-win cooperation links aid with profit-oriented activities, and thus altruism with capitalism. Based on these two different and even contradictory ideologies, the interpretation of Chinese projects has become situational. Although the primary purpose of China's involvement in Africa is to make a profit, Africa must also be shown to benefit, thereby demonstrating the success of the mutual-benefit policy in the twenty-first century. Therefore, such investment is usually presented as selfless aid for Africa. Although the government's method of helping Africa has changed, the public has been given no reason to change its perception of Africans as inferior.

Chinese Humanitarianism

As an illustration of Sino–African agricultural cooperation in the twenty-first century, the Sino–Zambia Friendship Farm has attracted political attention. Li Ruihuan, chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, visited the farm in 2003, further increasing its national recognition. The *People's Daily* published an article on Li's visit entitled "Chinese Must Give a Good Demonstration" (*Zhongguoren yao zuohao shifan*) (Liu 2003). The term "demonstration" had previously been used in aid contexts to describe Chinese technicians' exposition of agricultural techniques to African farmers, but was now used to describe a profit-oriented venture.

Chinese often fail to distinguish between African peoples. Therefore, the author of the *People's Daily* article used the term "black people" (*heiren*) rather than "Zambians" to describe the Zambian locals. Accord-

ing to the article, the proficient management and financial expertise of the Chinese had enabled the farm to hire 96 "black people," each of whom enjoyed a USD 22–26 monthly salary and welfare benefits such as insurance. Most importantly, Zambian locals were able to learn skills from the Chinese. Li Ruihuan also praised the farm for selling food to increase the local food supply, which he described as "a noble act of poverty alleviation and humanitarianism" (*fupin jikun de rendao zhuyi de gaoshang xingwei*).

In the *People's Daily* article, Zambians' gratitude for China's contribution was represented similarly to its pre-1980s manifestation: many locals in traditional dress sang and danced to welcome Li. Li also instructed the farm technicians to teach Chinese cultivation skills to the locals, because Zambia already had fertile land and perfect weather. The message was clear: Zambians welcomed the introduction of Chinese farming skills. Furthermore, Li's account of the visit reinforced the Chinese belief that black Africans are incapable of managing their fertile land.

Again, to justify the Chinese policy, black Africans had to be portrayed as inferior. Although China has invested in agriculture in Australia, the *People's Daily* neither uses the term "demonstration" to refer to their agribusinesses in Australia nor boasts that Australians have learned techniques from Chinese. The Chinese government does not emphasise its provision of insurance for Australian employees, because this is a legal obligation for employers in Australia; and Chinese officials definitely do not call their agribusiness in Australia a noble and humanitarian act.

The concept of Chinese "agricultural gods" was a response to images of African backwardness. As Africans were perceived to be unable to feed themselves, agribusiness was understood as a continuation of China's former altruism in Africa. As a result, Li Ruihuan and the *People's Daily* journalist quoted above interpreted China's investment precisely as humanitarian work in Africa. According to this logic, the African beneficiaries of China's investment were those who worked for Chinese corporations (providing employment opportunities, poverty relief, and skills development), and those who bought Chinese products (increasing local food supply). Therefore, Chinese profit-making was construed as aid provision, eliciting gratitude and adulation from the African people.

Overall, representations of the Chinese as agricultural gods and depictions of African adulation resembling those of the Mao era (locals singing, dancing, kneeling, and calling the Chinese saviours) have been used to demonstrate the success of China's post-Reform policy in Africa. Africans were once represented as gratefully welcoming China's non-

profit aid; they now worship the Chinese for their agribusiness. Chinese propaganda not only presents the government's policy as effective, but implies that shrewd Chinese investors enjoy both profits and respect in Africa. This is also the essence of Liu Jianjun's propaganda.

Chinese Angel Farmer

Influential Chinese in Africa

Liu Jianjun began to propagate the story of the Baoding villages in 2005, and became nationally and internationally famous after his CCTV interview in January 2007. Therefore, media reports regarding Sino–African agricultural cooperation during this period deserve special attention, as they directly contributed to public understanding of Africa and the acceptance and dissemination of the Baoding legend. The most positive representation of Sino–African cooperation was the story of Li Li, which supported Li Ruihuan's account of China's "noble act of humanitarianism" in Africa.

In November 2006, just before Liu's CCTV interview, when the world's attention was focused on the third Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, Li Li, the female head of another Chinese farm in Zambia, Jonken Farm, gained national recognition as the most highly ranked in the government's list of "Ten Chinese Who Deeply Moved the African People" (*gandong Feizhou de shiwei Zhongguoren*). Due to the scope of Chinese propaganda on Li Li's contribution to African society, she has been discussed in several Western studies (Bräutigam 2009: 254; Michel and Beuret 2009: 18). How did Li Li move the African people?

Li Li was first noticed by the public on 7 November 2004, when a 40-minute interview with Wang Chi, Li Li's husband and the head of Jonken Farm, was aired on Phoenix Television in its "Eternal Chinatown" (*tang ren jie*) slot. Li played a supporting role in the interview. She had been a nurse in Beijing with no farming experience before joining her husband to run Jonken Farm. Wang Chi described the farm's employees as follows:

> Black people's (*heiren*) spiritual quality of life is better than that of Chinese, because they do not worry […] unless they get hungry, black people generally do not worry about making a living. Black people have many failings, such as being irresponsible and bad at

> management […] many of them have petty-theft convictions and stick to the farm like lice (*shizi*).[5]

Wang Chi was killed in a car accident in 2005, and Li Li took over his position. In June 2006, the *People's Daily* published a moving story, circulated among African locals in Zambia, about a widow who successfully managed a farm worth USD 5 million. Major themes addressed in this story were the farm's 200 employees and 20 per cent share of Lusaka's market. Many other impressive achievements were reported in the article. Seven thousand locals had worked on the farm since 1994. Workers learned professional skills such as management. Over its history, the farm had accommodated 4,000 families, ensured that 14,000 were well fed and clothed (*wenbao*), and paid USD 45,000 to cover employees' pensions and insurance. As a result, Li Li won great respect from her employees (Huang 2006).

In December 2006, after Li Li received her award from the government, the *People's Daily* published her story again, newly entitled "Thousands of Africans Saved by [Li Li]." The article revealed that the farm had received USD 600,000 from the government's "foreign-aid fund" (*yuanwai zhuanxiang jijin*). This explains why Li Li's achievements were so highly praised in the official media: like the Sino–Zambia Friendship Farm, Jonken Farm represented a combination of aid and investment, and provided further proof of the effectiveness of China's Africa policy.

In addition to writing about the farm's large market share and its supporting numerous Zambian employees, the *People's Daily* journalist mentioned that Li Li had paid USD 150,000 in interest to a Zambian bank (which had loaned her USD 1.3 million). Due to these contributions to Zambian society, the locals called Li Li an "angel" (*tianshi*) and by extension felt great respect for China (Song 2006).

However, the impressive statistics and accounts of Zambian adulation deserve closer attention. Zambia has a very reasonable welfare law for labourers, which requires employers to provide insurance and ac-

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5 Translated by the author. The original Chinese reads, "*Zheli heiren de jingshen shenghuo de zhiliang yuan bi Zhongguoren de pubian jingshen shenghuo zhiliang yao gao, yinwei tamen meiyou youlu […] duzi e zhi qian heirenmen yiban bu tai weisheng huo fachou. Suoyi heiren you hen duo quedian, baokuo dui gongzuo de bufuze renhuo bu shanjing yingdengdeng […] hen duo shihou shouxia de yixie yuangong hen xiang jisheng zai nongchang zhe yangda qi yeshang de shizi, duoshao youdian xiaotou xiaomo de xingwei.*" The title of this interview is "*Zambiya muge*" (Zambian Pastoral). The whole interview text can be seen at <http://yangzh101.blog.sohu.com/236761462.html> (14 July 2018).

commodation. The law is so favourable to Zambian labourers that it has been described by the US Department of State as "extremely generous" (US Department of State 2013). To reduce the cost of welfare, Li Li limited the size of the farm's regular workforce, which explains why only USD 45,000 had been paid to cover employees' pensions and insurance since 1994. Most workers were hired only in busy seasons. Although this is simple, cost-effective behaviour, it is also worth noting that part-time workers (7,000) and their family members (14,000) were counted toward Jonken Farm's social contribution to underscore the success of Sino–African cooperation.

Chinese investment activities in the West that conform to local labour laws by supporting employees' welfare are never presented as charity. However, as black Zambians/black people were publicly perceived as lazy, irresponsible, poor managers and habitual thieves, everything provided by China could be portrayed as a contribution. Even Li Li's repayment of interest on loans (USD 15,000) was considered to help Africa.

When Investment Becomes Aid

Li Li was interviewed by numerous Chinese media outlets, and journalists at a popular magazine, *Southern Weekly*, visited her farm in 2010. Again, the farm's share of the local market, locals' laziness and theft, the diligence of Chinese workers, and China's contribution to Zambia were reported. In addition, the article misrepresented the profit-oriented farm as part of China's official agricultural-aid scheme, and the farm's Chinese managers as official technicians (Zhang 2010).

The extent of the farm's profit orientation was represented confusingly in the Chinese media, as Chinese aid is usually intertwined with investment. Even Chinese scholars are confused by China's aid strategy (Zhang, Yuan, and Kong 2010). Nevertheless, this strategy has received considerable support from academics, including Western scholars (Woods 2008). Citing his own experience in Mali, Professor Li Anshan of Peking University argued for the effectiveness of the Chinese policy as follows:

> This sugar factory was a Chinese aid project, but suffered losses after transferring to Mali. It is a joint venture now […] and has improved the local economy […] a European colleague said that aid is aid, business is business, so why are the two combined? In fact, any project that benefits local society is a good project. The traditional Western model of aid provision for Africa encountered challenges and became inactive. However, since China combined

> aid and investment in the 1990s, many projects have been revitalised. (Ning 2010)[6]

Combining aid and investment improves development efficiency and allows investment to be represented as aid in official propaganda. From the perspective of the Chinese public, Africans keep receiving gifts from China, and thus maintain their inferior status. As indicated by the Chinese ambassador to Tanzania, Lu Youqing, when Chinese smugglers are caught by African customs officials, they do not express guilt but complain about the waste of China's generous aid to Africa – despite the limited nature of such aid (Ning 2014).

Although Li Anshan praised the Chinese strategy of combining aid and investment, he also criticised the official stance on China–Africa relations: "Official publicity materials always position China as an altruistic donor, which is not true, and Africans also have a bad feeling about it" (Center for African Studies, Peking University 2012). This claim was supported by a complaint made by Sudan's ambassador to China that Chinese investment activities in Sudan are misrepresented as foreign aid (Zhou 2013: 164).

Africans have a "bad feeling" about China's aid because beneficiaries are usually expected to pay respect to aid providers. Although the current business-oriented model of Sino–African cooperation is more equal than the previous aid relationship, China tends to be identified as the giver – with a higher status than Africa – in the Chinese media. Therefore, it is not easy to correct Chinese perceptions of African inferiority. As long as Sino–African economic cooperation interlinks aid with investment, the Chinese public will continue to believe that Chinese businesspeople making profits in Africa are providing aid on the continent.

Overall, the story of the "angel of Zambia" echoes previous representations of the Chinese as "agricultural gods." China's private business activities in Africa are represented to the Chinese public as official aid. Chinese discourses emphasise the superior management skills and diligent working attitude of the Chinese, which are presented as guarantee-

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6 Translated by the author. The original Chinese reads, "*Zhe yuanben shi Zhongguo yuanzhu de xiangmu, danjian chengjiao gei Mali yunying houyi zhi kuisun, yushi xianzai chengwei hezi qiye […] tongxing de yiwei Ouzhou xuezhe hen yihuo, shuo yuanzhu jiushi yuanzhu, shangye hangwei jiushi shangye hangwei, weishime yao hunza qilai ne? Shishi shang, bu luncai qushi me fangshi, zhiyao shidang di shouyi jiushi hao shiqing. Xifang chuantong de yuanfei moshi shiji shangmian lin kunjing, quefa huoli, er Zhongguo zi shang shiji 90 niandai kaishi ba yuanzhu he touzi jiehe zhihou, dada diji huo le xiangguan xiangmu.*"

ing Chinese success and African adulation on the continent. All of these themes are evident in the legend of the Baoding villages.

Others Responsible for the Baoding Villages Myth

If the fable of the Baoding villages arose from the Chinese people's general understanding of Sino–African agricultural cooperation, it must have been propagated by individuals other than Liu Jianjun. For example, in 2007, the author of a book on investment in Africa published by the PRC National Audit Office wrote that

> God has given Africans an environment in which it is easy to survive, resulting in black people's persistent indolence […] a common Chinese farmer in Africa can become an expert, and a common [Chinese] technician in Africa can become a professor. (Jian 2007: 25)[7]

Government officials may hold similar opinions. Bräutigam observed that soon after the legend of the Baoding villages emerged, Li Ruogu, president of the Export–Import Bank of China, recommended that millions of unemployed Sichuan farmers start up agribusinesses in Africa and become landlords overseas. Bräutigam also noted that in 2009, the renowned agricultural scientist and National People's Congress delegate Zhao Zhihai proposed mobilising one million unemployed Chinese to solve the African food shortage (Bräutigam 2015: 56–74). Bräutigam found this proposal perplexing, but the rhetoric used by Zhao to persuade farmers to move overseas was not unfamiliar to the Chinese: "Our farmers are hard-working […] and will all become agricultural technicians in Africa" (Liu 2009).

Academics also provided support for the Baoding villages policy. Using the same logic as Zhao Zhihai, the Shanghai Information Center published an article entitled "Exporting Farmers to Africa," in which such exportation was described as a novel win-win policy (Shanghai Information Center 2009). In a 2008 paper in the Ministry of Commerce's journal, a new strategy for combining aid and investment was detailed: Chinese should be sent to run agribusinesses in Africa, on the

7 Translated by the author. The original Chinese reads, "*Shangdi fuyu le Feizhou ruci youyue de shengcun huanjing, cai zaocheng le heiren kuangri chijiu de duoxing […]. Zhongguo putong nongmin dao le Feizhou jiuke chengwei zhuanjia, yiban de jishu renyuan lai dao Feizhou ze ke chengwei jiaoshou.*"

grounds that Chinese farmers are more proficient than their African counterparts. "Food production requires intensive cultivation and extensive labour, which Africans cannot achieve" (Wang 2008: 38).

The belief that Africans are too lazy to produce food may also have been accepted by aid technicians. At the 2006 Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, the Chinese government promised to "send 100 senior experts on agricultural technologies to Africa" (Forum on China–Africa Cooperation 2006). One of these experts was Geng Naili, a hydraulic engineer from Xi'an, who was stationed in Côte d'Ivoire from 2009 to 2010. He recommended that 160,000–320,000 Chinese farmers be sent to Africa to support African agriculture. Another of the 100 technicians, Hao Feng from Chongqing, was stationed in Tanzania. Hao wholeheartedly accepted Geng's idea and encouraged Geng to submit an academic paper to South China Agriculture, of which Hao was the chief editor. Although the paper was not officially published, Geng made it public on the Internet. He also told netizens that Africa's land is fertile and its people lazy, enabling any Chinese farmer to become a technician and make a fortune on the African continent.[8]

Conclusion

Clearly, Liu Jianjun is not alone. He is supported by civil servants, academics, and government officials who believe that Chinese can help lazy Africans by making money from them. This attitude arose from the close connection between foreign aid and investment. As China's foreign-aid policy in Africa combines altruism and capitalism, it can be interpreted as aid and/or investment. Using the rhetoric of altruism, capitalism, and racism, Chinese investment in Africa has been presented as a humanitarian act.

Liu Jianjun's compelling interpretation of China's foreign-aid strategy in Africa explains why the legend of the Baoding villages survived for so long. He successfully merged public information, ideologies, and policies regarding Sino–African agricultural aid and investment from the past to the present, creating a narrative in which the Chinese had for

8 The original exchange between these overseas agricultural specialists was previously available for public viewing on an online forum run by the Ministry for Agriculture of the PRC <www.cicos.agri.gov.cn/Forums/ShowPost.aspx?PostID=778>, but has since been removed. However, Geng's major arguments still can be found on other websites: <http://bbs1.people.com.cn/postDetail.do?id=97677921&boardId=1>; <http://ido.3mt.com.cn/Article/201001/show1818704c32p1.html> (6 November 2017).

decades made money and won respect in Africa. This was consistent with long-held beliefs in China. Contrary to scholarly consensus, therefore, the Baoding villages do exist. They are not in Africa, but in China – more specifically, they reside in the minds of the Chinese.

For the last 50 years, the provision of aid has been central to China's policies in Africa. During the revolutionary era, the admiration of African farmers for Chinese aid was widely propagated. Today, the focus is African farmers' admiration for Chinese agribusiness. This change of emphasis indicates that the Chinese conceptualisation of agricultural aid in Africa has evolved with policy and ideological changes. African inferiority was once cited as a reason to provide aid; it is now an incentive to invest, enabling the Chinese to distinguish themselves on the African continent.

Last but not least, Liu Jianjun told the author in a 2016 interview that he was no longer building Baoding villages. After explaining Admiral Zheng He's link with Africa, Liu told me that he is now promoting "Zheng He" villages, whose inhabitants help Africa in the form of light industry, not agriculture. Liu clearly revised his legend to fit the narrative of the maritime Silk Road, part of Xi Jinping's "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) development strategy. A *People's Daily* correspondent in June 2017 argued that Liu's Baoding village is in essence the same as the BRI (Wei 2017). In May 2018, the reputable Hong Kong newspaper *Ta Kun Pao* reported that Liu would extend his African career based on the BRI (*Ta Kun Pao* 2018). As Chinese foreign policy evolves, a new interpretation of China's strategy to help Africa is likely to emerge in the near future and might be a suitable topic for research to come.

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Auf der Spur der Baoding-Dörfer: Eine kritische Analyse chinesischer Perzeptionen von chinesisch-afrikanischer landwirtschaftlicher Kooperation

Zusammenfassung: In der Regel untersuchen Wissenschaftler die Wahrnehmung Chinas aus afrikanischer Perspektive, um afrikanische Reaktionen auf die chinesische Wirtschaftsexpansion zu verstehen. Dabei wird häufig übersehen, dass in rassistisches Bild von Afrika konstruiert wurde, welches die Vorstellung fördert, chinesische Investitionen könnten die Afrikaner vor ihrer „Faulheit retten". Dieser Artikel analysiert die sich hartnäckig haltende Legende um die Baoding-Dörfer, die die chinesische Öffentlichkeit davon überzeugen soll, dass chinesische Bauern in Afrika leicht ihr Glück machen und Anerkennung finden können. Ein Blick auf die Geschichte der chinesisch-afrikanischen landwirtschaftlichen Kooperation zeigt, dass dieses Narrativ Anklang fand, weil es die chinesische Wahrnehmung der afrikanischen Minderwertigkeit bestärkte und bestehende Propaganda und Ideologie im Bezug auf ausländischer Hilfe und politische Effektivität reproduzierte.

Schlagwörter: Afrika, China, Baoding-Dörfer, chinesische Investitionen in Afrika, ausländische Hilfe, Liu Jianjun, chinesisch-afrikanische landwirtschaftliche Kooperation, Rassismus